

Towards a Wobbly methodology: establishing yourself as an organizer in a new workplace



This essay is the second in a series articulating a methodological framework for developing Wobbly organizers and identifying key features of workplace committee building at the micro level.

Much of the content of the *Industrial Worker*, as well as the *Organizer Training 101*, discuss the nuts and bolts of workplace struggle including how to conduct a successful 1-on-1 and form a workplace committee. What is often left unspoken is the path by which Wobblies go from the unemployment line to worker-organizers fully engaged in the social fabric of their job site.

As Wobblies, like the rest of the working-class, we must sell our labor-power in order to survive. Depending on the period and place, and the nature of the work and culture of the firm, obtaining certain jobs will require more research, training, skills, and overall effort. Taking the time to reflect on these challenges is important, and as Wobblies we should think strategically when considering where to seek employment. In the meantime, we can identify some basic components that will place us in a better position to establish ourselves as organizers in a new workplace.

Every Wob a Salt



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Every Wob a Salt

“Every worker is an organizer” is useful shorthand for some of the principles the IWW holds close to its heart. It’s both a phrase and philosophy that resides in the back of every Wobbly’s mind as they survey the shop floor or run their thumb down a list of co-workers—scanning for potential allies and bookmarking future 1-on-1’s. Stripped bare, it’s a Wobbly maxim that recognizes the necessity for workers to organize for a truly new society.

Consequently, as the IWW seeks to maximize its strength with still limited numbers, we encourage every Red Card to recognize themselves as a salt. Salting is the proven, time-tested tactic of obtaining a job at a certain workplace with the specific aim of building the Union.

Understanding the keys to securing a specific job in a particular workplace and learning how to establish oneself as a social leader are fundamental skills every Wobbly should have in their class struggle arsenal. After all, workplace organizers are most effective when they are exactly that – organizers at their place of work.

Getting the Job

Offering our labor-power for sale is always a stomach-churning process. Once we accept the fact that this needs to happen in order to put food on the table, applying for a job with the specific aim of building class power makes the whole charade slightly more palatable.

Deciding on the specifics of which industry, firm, and occupation would be most

strategic for any given Wob is a topic best reserved for another time. Assuming you have already selected your best possible targets, taking the steps to research the application and hiring process should follow. Discussing your immediate aim with FWs in the industry or contacts inside the shop can give you insights into what your potential boss is looking for in an ideal employee.

Devising ways to appear as the exemplary worker can range from simply creating a foolproof narrative about why this position is everything you've ever wanted in life, to the complexities of working an initial job that would give you a better chance of later getting hired at the original target. When building your resumé around the explanation that you and the occupation were meant for each other, stretching the truth as little as necessary about previous employers typically makes interviews less harrowing. Nonetheless, wiping away all clues pointing toward political activity or proclivity for leadership reassure an employer that hiring you will keep things running smoothly.

As in most aspects of organizing, having a partner helps tremendously; so collaborating with another Wobbly when building the narrative, constructing a resumé, and practicing interview scenarios can build confidence and expose any initial oversights. Throughout the application and interview processes, being over-the-top with thoroughness and giddy with enthusiasm (i.e. following up each step of the way with a thankful phone call or describing in detail your passion for customer service) will usually raise your chances of landing the job. Bosses are always ecstatic to hear wage slaves consistently recounting anecdotes of servility and acquiescence, and most interviewers will never pass up an opportunity to delightfully imbibe their company's own flavor of kool-aid.

Becoming a Social Leader

Once you've landed the job, it's tempting to jump right into agitating and educating co-workers. This approach is problematic for several reasons. Experience has shown that workers who do not first build relationships and establish themselves as social leaders within

the shop are apt to be quickly labeled as an arrogant and disgruntled employee by management and gain a reputation among co-workers as a "complainer" and/or just another naive "crazy radical."

Depending on the workplace it's generally a good rule of thumb to allow

yourself 3-6 months to get acquainted with the social landscape at your new job. During this time, organizing consists of getting to know as many names and faces as possible, social mapping, building positive relationships with everybody, including management and co-workers that you may find personally repulsive and lacking in class-consciousness. While organizing under the radar, having enemies only makes things harder, whether those enemies are worthy of ire or not.

Becoming a social leader requires putting yourself out there, going out of your way to introduce yourself to people and making it a point to say hello to folks both inside and out of your immediate work group. The first few weeks give you a unique opportunity to get acquainted with nearly every worker that passes you by. In many workplaces, especially at the point of exchange in sectors like food and retail, departments and jobs are segregated in numerous ways. Intentionally pursuing relationships that force you to move beyond your comfort zone requires seeking out co-workers who aren't like you. Doing so will introduce you to a wider, more diverse social milieu, and give you a more informed understanding of the composition of your workplace. This puts you at a tremendous advantage to become a social leader and teaches you a lot about what the organizing committee should look like in order to build substantial workers' power in your shop or campaign. At the same time, keeping all this information locked up in your head is nearly impossible. The taking of daily notes on the interactions you have with co-workers will prove indispensable when you want pass on that information to another Wobbly or simply organize your own thoughts into a clearer social map. Check with fellow organizers as to how they keep their notes in order so that you can devise a system that best fits your own situation.

Building a reputation as a worker who carries their load, helps others, covers shifts, arrives on time and doesn't call out sick frequently is another critical element of becoming a social leader. It's a cliché, but the best workers usually make the best organizers. Working hard and doing a 'good job' may increase the rate at which you're exploited, but it also makes the labor process easier for other workers, and they will take notice. Being known as someone whom everyone likes and respects is invaluable in establishing credibility, which is a vital prerequisite for assuming social leadership in the workplace.

Creating a Wobbly Workplace Culture

Many of our co-workers possess the qualities and characteristics of social

leadership just described. But becoming a social leader is only part of the process. Some social leaders aim to rise “from the ranks,” Wobblies aim to rise “with the ranks.” Thus, while working to establish oneself in the workplace and beginning to build a clandestine committee, Wobbly social leaders should aim to influence the culture on the job.

Building class solidarity is a dialectical process. Within the workforce, a Wobbly should seek to eliminate divisions that hinder class solidarity like racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity by engaging across barriers delineated by those dynamics. This takes the form of easing into informal cliques that form during breaks, attending and arranging social functions that include diverse groups of workers, and generally refusing to accept to conform

to constructs that hinder solidarity. We must facilitate the seamless weaving together of the disparate social groupings that make up our work site.

Creating a class-conscious culture at work also means that Wobblies learn to see organizing at home and in the community—with co-workers—as a natural and necessary part of organizing on the job. The working class holds its power at the point of production, but our organizing, i.e. our relationships to our co-workers, can’t be limited to the confined issues and dynamics of the job site. Ruling class exploitation extends far beyond the walls of the factory, the coffee bar, and the waterfront. The more we can show solidarity on a level that illustrates our relationship to one another as members of the working class (e.g. visiting co-workers on disability, helping them raise money to replace a stolen bike or to purchase a plane ticket to visit a deceased relative, offering to help out with childcare, etc.), drawing a connection between the reality of the wage system and the myriad effects which contribute to our collective misery, the more embedded we’ll be as class struggle social leaders.

At the same time we must seek to exacerbate antagonism between workers and bosses by illustrating the class conflict inherent in the capitalist mode of production. Everyone might have good reason to love the department manager who drinks with them after work, but it is our job to remind our co-workers that irrespective of personal relationships a boss might hold, they are still in the employing-class. We should make it clear that we have no quarrel with bosses as individuals, but at the end of the day they are on the other side of the fence and our opponents in the class war. Through agitation and education that demonstrates the character of our class, a Wobbly seeks to reform the culture of

any workplace they might enter to one that is conducive to struggle.

Part of that culture already exists in some form, and solidarity will always be present in any workplace, but for those jobs in which division seems rife, organizing demands that we do more than just integrate ourselves into existing social dynamics, and take the initiative to create our own. Sometimes this means as little as engaging with groups of workers where there would normally be no interaction, even at the risk of seeming awkward. Other times it might involve ruining the credibility of bosses with a high degree of social power amongst the workers. We must be prepared to work with the terrain that we are given, but also be willing to shape that terrain to make it more accommodating.

Ultimately, salting into a campaign asks a lot from the individual Wobbly. We are forced to put away our moral qualms about groveling in front our potential employers so that we can get the job with the most strategic significance. We shun some of our innate impulses to cut every corner when our bosses aren't looking, so that the co-workers who are watching will build faith in us. We hold in our delight when our co-worker begins to connect the dots of their exploitation, because we know our response will be much more enlightening when it is part of a conversation outside of work. And we turn our frustrations into the fire that motivates us when we see our supervisors make illogical and disgusting decisions, because we know the logic of capital cannot be argued away. All of this makes our day to day work tiring and often lacking in short-term gratification. But we fully understand that our individual protests, our firing because of a refusal to comply, or our ostracism for our constant complaints will lead us nowhere. Yet by going in through the back door, demonstrating our reliability, and developing strong relationships we lay the foundation for a struggle in which the ranks shall finally rise.

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